The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE PROFOUND THIS-WORLDLINESS OF CHRISTIANITY

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Palm Sunday

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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SCRIPTURE
Luke 19:29-40
Philippians 2:1-11

"Let the same word be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, ... emptied himself, ..."
Philippians 2:5,7

Fifty years ago today, April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer died. He was 39 years old. His execution by the Nazi government of Germany, not long before the German surrender that brought the European War to an end, has become a symbol of Christian faith for our time, and it will be remembered today in Christian churches all over the world.

Bonhoeffer did not intend to be a martyr or even a political activist. He was a pastor, educated in the great academic tradition of German universities. His family was well placed socially and economically. He was recognized in theological circles around the world as one of the brightest and most promising young Christian thinkers.

Bonhoeffer was a pacifist. When the Nazi government succeeded in simply absorbing the state church in Germany, by installing as its leaders men who were committed to the political ideology of Adolph Hitler, Bonhoeffer became part of the Confessing Church, a group of brave German Christians who saw the inherent evils of Nazi ideology and their responsibility to affirm the integrity of the faith, even if it meant acting politically.

Bonhoeffer organized an underground seminary to educate pastors for the Confessing Church. He wrote, taught, corresponded with Christian intellectuals in this country, and finally, at the invitation of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and with the personal encouragement of Reinhold Niebuhr, the leading American theologian of the day, and with whom he had studied earlier, he came to America in 1939.

Niebuhr and other scholars encouraged Bonhoeffer to remain; to pursue his theological work, to study and teach and write here and to develop his theology. But what was occurring in Germany to his friends and colleagues and family weighed heavily. And so, after several months, he boarded a ship and returned to confront, with his people, whatever the future would bring.

Back in Germany, the pacifist pastor began a brave intellectual and spiritual journey. The theological heritage of his culture and church rested on Luther's idea of two realms, or kingdoms: the realm of God and the realm of the political state. The two are altogether separate. One can live equally in both, even though they may at times be in conflict. Nazi theoreticians loved that idea; exaggerated it beyond any Lutheran perimeters by demanding, for instance, that it was the duty of the church to support the state and teach obedience to political authorities. Gradually, Bonhoeffer came to see the idolatry and potential for evil in that way of thinking. With other members of his family, he joined the resistance, even working for the government as a double agent, and finally agreed to be a part of the effort to assassinate Hitler, overthrow the government and reach an accord with the allies. He was arrested for his resistance activities. While he was in prison, the assassination plot on Hitler's life was carried out. It almost succeeded. When it failed, the names of the conspirators were revealed and Bonhoeffer's fate was sealed.

On April 9, 1945, he was taken from his cell at Flossenburg prison, led a final worship service for his fellow prisoners and jailers, and was hanged.

Bonhoeffer never had an opportunity to develop his thinking into a theological system, to write his theological text. In fact, when I entered seminary in 1959 I had never heard of him. Introduction to Theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago was taught by the late Joseph Sittler. The course focused on the Greek philosophic basis of early Christian theology, touched on the ideas of Augustine, Aquinas, and focused on modern thinkers, Schleirmacher, Hegel, Nietzsche, Alfred North Whitehead — requisite intellectual basic training. But what caught my imagination but also my heart and soul and provided for me — and many others — the impetus for ministry, was Sittler's reference to a name I had never heard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Civil Rights movement was

heating up. People were talking about getting involved on the basis of religious values of justice and freedom. People were talking about protesting, maybe even breaking the law — civil disobedience. When Sittler was done lecturing and asked for questions, someone would always ask, "What does this Aquinas and Whitehead stuff have to do with what's happening in Alabama, Mississippi, or Woodlawn, for that matter?"

One day Sittler got out a little paperback book and said, "Read this. It's not on the curriculum here. This will help you see what Aquinas and Whitehead have to do with what's happening in the world." The book was *Letters and Papers from Prison*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

And so I read about a young pastor writing from a prison cell just 14 years earlier, writing to his parents and friends, as he waited to die. For me and for many of us, Bonhoeffer's story taught the most important lesson of all: that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is no casual, easy thing: that faith demands commitment, and courage, and sometimes — a new thought for us — it was the 50s, after all — the willingness to suffer.

Bonhoeffer had written,

> "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's, who had to leave the ministry and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time — death in Jesus Christ." *[The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 79]

I learned three important things reading Bonhoeffer while I was supposed to be reading Whitehead and Nietzsche. One is that to be honest about my personal faith means much, much more than the intellectual struggle with ideas about God and Jesus. It had to do with me, personally, deeply, profoundly. It was not merely agreeing intellectually to the substance of the creeds. It was, to use the popular term, existential.

Second, the place where one lives out that faith is not so much the university classroom, or even the church sanctuary, but the world: the city street, the marketplace, courthouse, boardroom, emergency roo. The world is where discipleship is expressed.

Third, when a man or woman musters the courage to believe the Gospel, and internalize the Gospel, and live the Gospel in the world, something is added to that person, besides the hassle, the cost, the burden — namely life, full and joyful life as God intends to be lived.

Bonhoeffer was a critic of the church. When he looked at the church of his day, he saw an institution almost totally devoted to being an enclave from life, an escape from life, a safe haven from the tragedy and incongruity and shame of living in a Nazi state. The religion Bonhoeffer saw pervading his society was thoroughly other-worldly. That religion, with its piety, its escape from the world, Bonhoeffer decided, was irrelevant. Its business was not Christian faith, but self- preservation. Any church not willing to die for its mission is no longer the Church of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer said, it is merely a religious institution.

Because he was a theologian Bonhoeffer concluded that the problem was not sociological or psychological or political but theological.

The God of traditional religion is remote, isolated, sitting on a grand throne in heaven. The God of religion is powerful: all-powerful, omnipotent, omniscient, in charge of everything from the grand sweep of human history to the minor details of your life and mine, like finding a parking place, or a buyer for the condo.

That is not the God of Christianity. But it is a God with a lot of historical credentials and a lot of market appeal. It is the god of Greek philosophy — the mysterious, all powerful deity, without passion or feelings or connections with mere creatures; the god of Plato and Aristotle, the god who tortures Prometheus for showing compassion. It is the powerful god of Roman emperors; the god invoked by kings and dictators and generals in the process of killing enemies, the god of TV hucksters pitching in the name of a Christian nation.

All my life I have wanted and waited to see the Sistine Chapel. I made it there last summer. It is stunning. It is more than I expected; bigger, higher and much brighter. It is, in a sense, the high point of our civilization — Michelangelo, renaissance artist, painting the ceiling of a Chapel in the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome. It's all there — imperial power, grandeur, magnificence, infallibility. It was a moving experience to stand in that place and to look at that incredible work of art. And it was theologically instructive. For there, at the center, arm extended to touch Adam's finger with the miracle of life, is God — a powerful, muscular, potent, masculine creator. Almighty, all powerful, omnipotent God.

The simple truth is, and Bonhoeffer was the one who helped me see it, that Christianity starts in a different place when it talks about God. Michelangelo was a great artist, but a lousy theologian. In fact, he missed the point. But then, so did the Roman hierarchy. So does the Church in every age.

The God Christianity proclaims is seen — not in intellectual categories of omnipotence, or muscular statues and powerful frescoes, but in the person and life of Jesus of Nazareth, Palestinian Jew, the one who was crucified. The symbol of Christianity is not a coat of arms, but a cross, a fact that is an embarrassment to some, an impediment in fact to incredibly successful religion.

William Placher, one of our Presbyterian theologians, has written a book, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God,* in which he writes:

> "Most people ... whether or not they believe ... assume that they know roughly what the word 'God' means. God is all powerful, like a King, an absolute monarch ... To read the Biblical narratives is to encounter a God who is, first of all, love. Love involves a willingness to put oneself at risk, and God is in fact vulnerable in love, vulnerable even to great suffering." [p. XIII]

God becomes vulnerable, in Jesus Christ, in order to love the world. God becomes vulnerable in order to invite our love. Love is always vulnerable and no day so eloquently expresses the heart of the matter as Palm Sunday: the day when Jesus comes to the city, the capitol city, there to confront the very center of the life of his people: the day when his message and mission move from the safety of Galilee to the obvious risks of Jerusalem. It is the day when he flirts with triumph. This crowd that welcomes him with Hosannas and palm branches wants him to be king: to reign in power over his nation. It is the day when Jesus rejects that alternative, declines that power and chooses instead a course of action that identifies with the poor, the weak, the oppressed and which will result in his crucifixion; chooses, St. Paul wrote, to empty himself, humble himself to the point of death on a cross. God exalts just this self-emptying, this pouring out of the self in obedience to God, Paul wrote.

Bonhoeffer was concerned that this strong gospel, with its compellingly different notion of a God whose power is in weakness, and whose strength is expressed in becoming vulnerable, doesn't get heard because the church doesn't say it, doesn't believe it. Bonhoeffer said the church dispenses "cheap grace," not the costly grace of Jesus Christ and that cheap grace — easy religion — will always seem like a better deal than authentic discipleship.

In a recent bestselling book which describes the future for our culture the first market trend is something called "cocooning." Faith Popcorn describes us "huddled in high tech caves" — a full scale retreat.

> "Cocooning," she says, "is to pull a shell of safety around yourself, so you're not at the mercy of a mean, unpredictable world — of rude waiters and noise pollution, crack-crimes, recession and AIDS. Cocooning is about insulation and avoidance." *[The Popcorn Report.]*

Religion can play directly into that market reality — that desire for insulation and avoidance.

I think it is important to ask if the current political climate is not a reflection as well, a political cocoon which further isolates and insulates the fortunate, which means most of us, from the realities of the world we have created. Nobody expects that states and cities will raise taxes to compensate for reductions in education, health care, housing, food. You and I live in a city where little children are shot almost every day, or dropped out of windows, or abused by crack-addicted adults. We live in a city under siege from a deadly combination of poverty, drugs and guns. We are talking seriously about making assault rifles more accessible, about reducing funds for community- based

programs that have a chance of reducing crime, about fewer resources for housing and health care and education which are, we know, component parts of a better civilization, a better world, a better city. We are, I think sometimes, climbing all over one another to get a place in the cocoon.

And today we cannot go, today — the day we remember the humble man on his donkey, emptying himself in love and devotion to his friends, his people, his God, today we cannot "cocoon."

On July 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend and student Eberhard Bethge. Bethge is an old man now. I met him and talked with him last summer.

> "Dear Eberhard, During the past year or so I've come to know and understand more the profound, this-worldliness of Christianity ... I am discovering right up to the moment, that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to have faith. By 'this-worldliness' I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes, failures, perplexities ..."

He came to the city, our Lord Jesus did. It is in the midst of life that you and I follow him with whatever faith and courage we can muster. "Living unreservedly in life's duties" Bonhoeffer put it, and for most — perhaps all of us — it will not mean sacrificing our lives literally in an act of political resistance. But it might mean emptying ourselves, giving our lives to the thankless task of caring for an aging parent, a mother with Alzheimers who no longer recognizes us; a father confined and bedridden; a spouse, weak with illness; a friend, a partner wasting away in the ravages of HIV-AIDS. It may mean a dogged, determined, tough love for a teenager bent on self-destruction. It may mean patient forbearance of a spouse who has assaulted our deepest pride and integrity in betrayal. It may mean showing up for work, doing a job we detest — because others depend on us. It may mean pursuing our cause, our vocation, in spite of obstacles in our path or opposition or sacrifices. It may mean teaching a class, tutoring a youngster, cooking a meal, holding a hand.

Those are the places where you and I follow him. This world — this beautiful, terrible world God so passionately loves, this world is where we are his faithful disciples and where he promises to bless us with gifts of peace and fulfillment.

"Only a suffering God can help," Bonhoeffer wrote. And this day — the first day of the week in which he will be betrayed, arrested, humiliated and crucified — is the promise that God comes to be with us. As our Lord walked bravely into the city, so this day is the promise that God walks ahead of us into every valley of the shadow of death, stands beside us in pain, sickness, depression, that God — in Jesus Christ — becomes vulnerable — in order to love us — in order to claim our love — our devotion — our lives.

Amen.